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THE HOLLOWAY REPORT: DID IT REFLECT ALL THE FACTS
AND LESSONS LEARNED

BY

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The Holloway Report: Did It Reflect All The Facts

And Lessons Learned

An Individual Essay

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The basic theme of the essay is questioning whether or not the Joint Chief of Staff directed investigation into the attempted rescue of embassy personnel held in Iran was thorough enough. The Holloway Report, as it is commonly called, is the only official review of the failed raid and as such, is viewed as the source document addressing what went wrong and what actions need to be taken to ensure they don't recur. But did the Board scrutinize the operation as accurately as the situation demanded? Several examples are cited to suggest that this was not the case. Special Operations are playing a major role in today's Army and much of what has been directed by Congress can be directly attributed to the findings of the Holloway Report. Yet there remains significant facts or insights that need to be reported or expanded. It is concluded that the Special Operations Review Group should reopen the investigation to objectively analyze all aspects of the operation and ensure all lessons learned are reported.

After the failure of the Iranian rescue mission in April 1980, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed that a Special Operations Review Group examine all aspects of the operation to determine what happened and to make recommendations for future military special operations. The Board was comprised of six senior flag officers representing all the services; three were on active duty and three were retired. The members were: Admiral James L. Holloway III, U.S. Navy (Retired), who retired in 1978 as the Chief of Naval Operations; Lieutenant General Samuel F. Wilson, U.S. Army (Retired), who prior to his retirement was the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency; Lieutenant General Leroy J. Manor, U.S. Air Force (Retired), who had commanded the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Forces in Vietnam; Major General James C. Smith, U.S. Army, who had commanded the Army Aviation Center and was serving as the Army's Director of Training, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations; Major General John L. Pistrowski, U.S. Air Force, was the Deputy Commander for Air Defense, Tactical Air Command; and Major General Alfred M. Gray, Jr., U.S. Marine Corps, who was serving as the Deputy of Development/Director, Development Center, for the Marine Corps Development and Education Command. All the Board members were reported to possess extensive special operations experience at both the command and planner level. The Special Operations Review Group Rescue Mission Report which the Board submitted in August 1980 has commonly been referred to as the Holloway Report after its chairman, Admiral Holloway.

The Board's purpose was to conduct an independent investigation of the hostage rescue mission with the aim to ultimately improve the United States military's counterterrorist capability. The Board was granted access to all Department of Defense information and personnel. As Admiral Holloway stated, his charter was to conduct a

no-holds-barred assessment....to independently appraise the rescue attempt so we could recommend improvements in planning, organizing, coordinating, directing, and controlling any such operations in the future.

The Board's report was intended to focus primarily on the Department of Defense. It was not intended to produce a "white paper" analyzing the mission at the national level but was to restrict itself solely to military issues.

The Board conducted a 4-month investigation reviewing all pertinent documents, interviewing participants, witnessing special operations exercises, and being exposed to the equipment used on the operation. After gathering all essential information, the Board reported on twenty-three significant issues. Eleven issues were determined to be major issues, that is, they

has an identifiable influence on the outcome of the hostage rescue effort or [ones] that should receive the most careful consideration at all levels in planning for any future special operations.

The other twelve issues were deemed less essential but reflected valuable lessons learned. Additionally, the Board made recommendations that a permanent counterterrorist Joint Task Force be established reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and that a Special Operations Advisory Panel be formed to

periodically review highly classified special operations planning - a sort of "murder board" to assess the feasibility of any future proposed plans. This report has been touted by General David C. Jones, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that directed the investigation, as a thorough and critical review of the operation. Using this report and the recommendations of the Board, the Department of Defense directed that the Joint Special Operations Command be formed in 1980 to specifically focus on counterterrorist operations, and more recently, Congress has stipulated that the military establish a separate unified command for special operations answering to an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations. Basically, the evolution of our special operations is a direct reflection of the findings of the Holloway Report and the lessons learned. But is the Holloway Report as precise and thorough a study as it should be? Did it ask the difficult questions that needed to be asked and identify shortcomings across the entire spectrum, or did it simply placate those who demanded some action be taken? Do we have all the facts to include the guidance and restrictions imposed from the National Command Authority and have all the lessons learned been recorded and reported out to ensure that future planners and operators have as detailed an account as possible on which to base future decisions?

In preparing for an oral history to be conducted with Lieutenant General James B. Vaught, U.S. Army (Retired), who was the commander of the Joint Task Force (COMJTF), charged with planning, organizing, coordinating, controlling, and executing

the rescue attempt, I interviewed several people who were on the planning staff, two operators, read various accounts, and thoroughly reviewed the Holloway Report. I initially relied heavily on their report believing it to be an accurate, objective account of the operation reflecting all essential aspects. But serious questions began to arise that led me to the conclusion that numerous important issues were incomplete, inaccurate, or simply not reported. I began to doubt the objectivity of the report. Rather than accepting the report as a superb attempt on the part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to professionally analyze the operation on the basis of what could be learned, I began to view it as a disappointing after-action review which did not hit the mark. This feeling was confirmed during an extensive interview session with LTG Vaught.

Lieutenant General Vaught stated that he met with the Special Operations Review Group presumably after they had read the after-action report that the joint task force had prepared. He was questioned for only 45-60 minutes about various aspects of the operation. Some specifics were requested but primarily the session was an overview of the entire operation. It was LTG Vaught's understanding that the Board would query others, review additional information and then recall LTG Vaught for clarification or redress. I gathered also from my interview with LTG Vaught that he fully expected to see the report prior to the Board releasing its findings so as to ensure its accuracy and provide comments for clarification. Lieutenant General Vaught was neither called back by the Board nor did he have the opportunity to review the report prior to its release.

It seems inconceivable to me that the commander of the joint task force on a mission of this magnitude, with all its complexity and controversy would be questioned for such a short period of time. I am likewise puzzled as to why the Board did not call LTG Vaught back to review their findings with him prior to releasing these findings to the JCS and to the American public in an unclassified version. Surely we have learned from past experiences the value of ensuring government reports are accurate before we subject them to the scrutiny of the headhunters who prey on ill-prepared or "sanitized" documents. More importantly, it was in the interest of the military to ensure that any findings and recommendations that might be controversial were made with the most precise information available and even reflected dissenting views where appropriate. We are left to assume that the Holloway Report accurately reflected the events from 4 November 1979, when LTG Vaught was charged with planning the mission, through 23 April 1980, when the mission was aborted in the Iranian desert due to mechanical difficulties on the helicopters. From comments by LTG Vaught, statements on record by Admiral Stanfield Turner (who was Director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the period of the rescue mission), discussions with officers involved in both the ground and air operations, and a recent guest speaker to the Army War College, I am convinced that the Special Operations Review Group did not conduct as exhaustive an investigation as the situation dictated and, consequently, the Department of Defense did not realize the full scope of the potential lessons to be learned from this trauma.

To support my premise, I will cite several examples where the Holloway Report does not reflect all the facts. First and foremost, the Holloway Report states that one of the two factors that directly caused the mission to abort was the unexpected helicopter failure rate. The Board suggests that "additional helicopters and crews would have reduced the risk of abort due to mechanical failure." It was LTC Vaught's contention that the helicopters the task force decided upon, the RH-53D Sea Stallion, were at a premium; so much so that there were not sufficient helicopters available to both train with here in the United States and also to preposition the required number aboard the carrier NIMITZ to be deployed to the objective area. More importantly, if the helicopters that were made available were in a better maintenance posture then maybe the mechanical failures would not have occurred. The maintenance posture and the number of hours the helicopters were flown while on board the NIMITZ was always a concern of LTG Vaught. The Navy had been instructed to conduct extended flying missions for the helicopters on the carrier to ensure that they were capable of making the distance required on the mission. Two inspection visits by task force personnel reported this was not occurring. LTG Vaught expressed his dismay to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and requested that he be permitted to personally go out to the NIMITZ to sort out the problem. This was denied. One of the Navy pilots I talked with stated that the helicopters were only flown short distances primarily because no one aboard the NIMITZ understood the intent of the requirement. For operational security reasons, the purpose

for the flight request was not relayed to the NIMITZ. However, a JCS message requiring the flights was transmitted to the NIMITZ, yet was apparently ignored. Why? Would the helicopters have been mission ready if the flights were conducted and extensive maintenance pulled? Why were these issues not addressed by the Board?

A recent high level guest speaker to the War College volunteered that his organization had been tasked on short notice to load six RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopters onto a Galaxy C5-A aircraft within 24 hours. He was not instructed why and did not know their destination. The crews were sent with them but were not used and placed in isolation. Three of the helicopters had extremely high flying hours and were due to be serviced. The speaker said that had he known what the helicopters were to be used for he would have replaced them. (His comments suggest that a pool of reserves existed at a time when the COMJTF was required to use UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters for rehearsals as insufficient RH-53D's were available.) The speaker's comments made me question whether or not the task force was provided with helicopters that met the standards required for the operation. There was doubt in the speaker's mind. From the onset the linchpin to the operation was the helicopters. A minimum of six were required; anything less would result in an abort. Why was not more priority given in this arena? Why didn't the carrier task force respond to the JCS directive to fly the extended missions? Why were sufficient RH-53D's not made available both on board the NIMITZ and out at the rehearsal site?

As an aside, we have not learned from this mishap despite the implementation of the recommendation by the Holloway Board to establish a Joint Special Operations Command. The Air Force has been tasked for over 2 years to field more Pave Low helicopters yet has stonewalled that requirement quite effectively in favor of fixed wing requirements. Consequently, the U.S. is critically short of these special operations helicopters. The Joint Special Operations Command was established to prevent service parochialism and guarantee our special operating forces had the personnel and resources necessary to accomplish their mission. However, as long as the services retain the right to program and budget their "share" of the special operations community there exists the potential for a "realignment" of priorities. In other words, if those items a particular service has proponency to field are programmed in the POM based on that services' priorities and not what is required to support special operations, then joint operations may suffer.

The Holloway Report stated that

by not utilizing an existing JTF organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had to start, literally, from the beginning to establish a JTF, find a commander, create an organization, provide a staff, develop a plan, select the units, and train the forces before attaining even the most rudimentary mission readiness.

Lieutenant General Vaught, in his oral history, was quite emphatic that the type of experience required for this operation was lacking within the Army at that time. No planning cell with an understanding of special operations on the magnitude required even existed at the JCS level. An ad hoc organization was

piecemealed together, not only to bring in the best possible talent to plan, control, and execute this highly complicated, surgical operation, but also for operational security reasons. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and LTG Vaught determined that for the operation to have any opportunity for success, it was essential that we did not telegraph our intentions to attempt a rescue (same rationale used in the Son Tay raid). Attempting to bring the necessary planners into an existing JTF organization may have resulted in too many rumors and consequently a security leak. What is not addressed in the Holloway Report is what type guidance did the JCS provide concerning operational security, force structure, and command and control lash-up. Was a crisis management center established and, if so, what type assistance did it render? Little is reflected on the subsequent involvement of JCS after a task force commander was identified. How involved did the JCS remain after 12 November 1979? How did they envision their role in the planning phase of the operation? This area demands expansion if we are to have a thorough appreciation for the interaction between the JCS and the National Command Authority and a joint task force charged with executing in operation. Didn't we have similar problems with Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada in 1983?

An indepth review of the command and control relationships needs to be reevaluated. Lieutenant General Vaught takes a strong exception to the Holloway Board's findings in this area. As he stated, there is evidence on record in the Congressional records that show that the commanders subordinate to LTG Vaught

each knew who was in charge during each phase and at what locations. Additionally, none of the task force commanders felt there existed a significant problem with command and control. The chairman of the Congressional review committee after hearing the testimony stated that it was clear to him that there existed a formalized command and control structure - something the Holloway Board reported as "tenuous and fragile and not well understood."

There were numerous other discrepancies and misgivings about the report that are classified and unable to be discussed here that require clarification or investigation. Admiral Stansfield Turner was quoted in an interview by the Washington Post as stating, "that the raid had not been completely reviewed for the lessons it held." He suggested that the entire episode be scrutinized at not only the Department of Defense level but also at the National Command Authority level and all supporting agencies. General David C. Jones, the then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was vehemently opposed to the suggestion and it was never done. The highly classified Holloway Report remains the only known "official" investigation into the Iranian rescue mission.

I personally believe we owe it to the country to objectively analyze all aspects of the mission and to record dissenting views on findings or recommendations so future planners and students of the military profession and national strategists have an accurate, complete, and objective after-action report on which to gauge future operations.